

Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit by Sylvia Plath



1 The year the war began I was in the fifth grade at the Annie F. Warren Grammar School in Winthrop, and that was the winter I won the prize for drawing the best Civil Defence signs. That was also the winter of Paula Brown's new snowsuit, and even now, thirteen years later, I can recall the changing colours of those days, clear and definite patterns seen through a kaleidoscope.

2 I lived on the bay side of town, on Johnson Avenue, opposite the Logan Airport, and before I went to bed each night, I used to kneel by the west window of my room and look over to the lights of Boston that blazed and blinked far off across the darkening water. The sunset flaunted its pink flag above the airport, and the sound of waves was lost in the perpetual droning of the planes. I marvelled at the moving beacons on the runway and watched, until it grew completely dark, the flashing red and green lights that rose and set in the sky like

shooting stars. The airport was my Mecca, my Jerusalem. All night I dreamed of flying.

3 Those were the days of my technicolour dreams. Mother believed that I should have an enormous amount of sleep, and so I was never really tired when I went to bed. This was the best time of the day, when I could lie in the vague twilight, drifting off to sleep, making up dreams inside my head the way they should go. My flying dreams were believable as a landscape by Dalí, so real that I would awake with a sudden shock, a breathless sense of having tumbled like Icarus from the sky and caught myself on the soft bed just in time.

4 These nightly adventures in space began when Superman started invading my dreams and teaching me how to fly. He used to come roaring by in his shining blue suit with his cape whistling in the wind, looking remarkably like my Uncle Frank, who was living with Mother and me. In the magic whirring of his cape I could hear the wings of a hundred seagulls, the motors of a thousand planes.

5 I was not the only worshiper of Superman in our block. David Sterling, a pale, bookish boy who lived down the street, shared my love for the sheer poetry of flight. Before supper every night, we listened to Superman together on the radio, and during the day we made up our own adventures on the way to school.

6 The Annie F. Warren Grammar School was a red brick building, set back from the main highway on a black tar street, surrounded by barren gravel playgrounds. Out by the parking lot David and I found a perfect alcove for our Superman dramas. The dingy back entrance to the school was deep set in a long passageway which was an excellent place for surprise captures and sudden rescues.

7 During recess, David and I came into our own. We ignored the boys playing baseball on the gravel court and the girls giggling at dodge-ball in the dell. Our Superman games made us outlaws, yet gave us a sense of windy superiority. We even found a stand-in for a villain in Sheldon Fein, the sallow mamma's boy on our block who was left out of the boys' games because he cried whenever anybody tagged him and always managed to fall down and skin his fat knees.

8 At this time my Uncle Frank was living with us while waiting to be drafted, and I was sure that he bore an extraordinary resemblance to Superman incognito. David couldn't see his likeness as clearly as I did, but he admitted that Uncle Frank was the strongest man he had ever known, and could do lots of tricks like making caramels disappear under napkins and walking on his hands.

9 That same winter, war was declared, and I remember sitting by the radio with Mother and Uncle Frank and feeling a queer

foreboding in the air. Their voices were low and serious, and their talk was of planes and German bombs. Uncle Frank said something about Germans in America being put in prison for the duration, and Mother kept saying over and over again about Daddy: "I'm only glad Otto didn't live to see this; I'm only glad Otto didn't live to see it come to this."

10 In school we began to draw Civil Defence signs, and that was when I beat Jimmy Lane in our block for the fifth-grade prize. Every now and then we would practice an air raid. The fire bell would ring and we would take up our coats and pencils and file down the creaking stairs to the basement, where we sat in special corners according to our colour tags, and put the pencils between our teeth so the bombs wouldn't make us bite our tongues by mistake. Some of the little children in the lower grades would cry because it was dark in the cellar, with only the bare ceiling lights on the cold black stone.

11 The threat of war was seeping in everywhere. At recess, Sheldon became a Nazi and borrowed a goose step from the movies, but his Uncle Macy was really over in Germany, and Mrs. Fein began to grow thin and pale because she heard that Macy was a prisoner and then nothing more.

12 The winter dragged on, with a wet east wind coming always from the ocean, and the snow melting before there was enough for coasting. One Friday afternoon, just before Christmas, Paula Brown gave her annual birthday party, and I was invited

because it was for all the children on our block. Paula lived across from Jimmy Lane on Somerset Terrace, and nobody on our block really liked her, because she was bossy and stuck up, with pale skin and long red pigtails and watery blue eyes.

13 She met us at the door of her house in a white organdy dress, her red hair tied up in sausage curls with a satin bow. Before we could sit down at the table for birthday cake and ice cream, she had to show us all her presents. There were a great many because it was both her birthday and Christmas time too.

14 Paula's favourite present was a new snowsuit, and she tried it on for us. The snowsuit was powder blue and came in a silver box from Sweden, she said. The front of the jacket was all embroidered with pink and white roses and bluebirds, and the leggings had embroidered straps. She even had a little white angora beret and angora mittens to go with it.

15 After dessert we were all driven to the movies by Jimmy Lane's father to see the late afternoon show as a special treat. Mother had found out that the main feature was *Snow White* before she would let me go, but she hadn't realized that there was a war picture playing with it.

16 The movie was about prisoners of the Japanese who were being tortured by having no food or water. Our war games and the radio programmes were all made up but this was real, this really happened. I blocked my ears to shut out the groans of the

thirsty, starving men, but I could not tear my eyes away from the screen.

17 Finally, the prisoners pulled down a heavy log from the low rafters and jammed it through the clay wall so they could reach the fountain in the court, but just as the first man got to the water, the Japanese began shooting the prisoners dead, and stamping on them, and laughing. I was sitting on the aisle, and I stood up in a hurry and ran out to the girls' room, where I knelt over a toilet bowl and vomited up the cake and ice cream.

18 After I went to bed that night, as soon as I closed my eyes, the prison camp sprang to life in my mind, and again the groaning men broke through the walls, and again they were shot down as they reached the trickling fountain. No matter how hard I thought of Superman before I went to sleep, no crusading blue figure came roaring down in heavenly anger to smash the yellow men who invaded my dreams. When I woke up in the morning, my sheets were damp with sweat.

19 Saturday was bitterly cold, and the skies were gray and blurred with the threat of snow. I was dallying home from the store that afternoon, curling up my chilled fingers in my mittens, when I saw a couple of kids playing Chinese tag out in front of Paula Brown's house.

20 Paula stopped in the middle of the game to eye me coldly. "We need someone else," she said. "Want to play?" She tagged

me on the ankle then, and I hopped around and finally caught Sheldon Fein as he was bending down to fasten one of his furlined overshoes. An early thaw had melted away the snow in the street, and the tarred pavement was gritted with sand left from the snow trucks. In front of Paula's house somebody's car had left a glittering black stain of oil slick.

21 We went running about in the street, retreating to the hard, brown lawns when the one who was "It" came too close. Jimmy Lane came out of his house and stood watching us for a short while, and then joined in. Every time he was "It," he chased Paula in her powder blue snowsuit, and she screamed shrilly and looked around at him with her wide, watery eyes, and he always managed to catch her.

22 Only one time she forgot to look where she was going, and as Jimmy reached out to tag her, she slid into the oil slick. We all froze when she went down on her side as if we were playing statues. No one said a word, and for a minute there was only the sound of the plane across the bay. The dull, green light of later afternoon came closing down on us, cold and final as a window blind.

23 Paula's snowsuit was smeared wet and black with oil along the side. Her angora mittens were dripping like black cat's fur. Slowly, she sat up and looked at us standing around her, as if searching for something. Then, suddenly, her eyes fixed on me.

24 "You," she said deliberately, pointing at me, "you pushed me."

25 There was another second of silence, and then Jimmy Lane turned on me. "You did it," he taunted. "You did it."

26 Sheldon and Paula and Jimmy and the rest of them faced me with a strange joy flickering in the back of their eyes. "You did it, you pushed her," they said.

27 And even when I shouted "I did not!" they were all moving in on me, chanting in a chorus, "Yes, you did, yes, you did, we saw you." In the well of faces moving toward me I saw no help, and I began to wonder if Jimmy had pushed Paula, or if she had fallen by herself, and I was not sure. I wasn't sure at all.

28 I started walking past them, walking home, determined not to run, but when I had left them behind me, I felt the sharp thud of a snowball on my left shoulder, and another. I picked up a faster stride and rounded the corner by Kellys'. There was my dark brown shingled house ahead of me, and inside, Mother and Uncle Frank, home on furlough. I began to run in the cold, raw evening toward the bright squares of light in the windows that were home.

29 Uncle Frank met me at the door. "How's my favorite trooper?" he asked, and he swung me so high in the air that my

head grazed the ceiling. There was a big love in his voice that drowned out the shouting which still echoed in my ears.

30 “I’m fine,” I lied, and he taught me some jujitsu in the living room until Mother called us for supper.

31 Candles were set on the white linen tablecloth, and miniature flames flickered in the silver and the glasses. I could see another room reflected beyond the dark dining-room window where the people laughed and talked in a secure web of light, held together by its indestructible brilliance.

32 All at once the doorbell rang, and Mother rose to answer it. I could hear David Sterling’s high, clear voice in the hall. There was a cold draft from the open doorway, but he and Mother kept on talking, and he did not come in. When Mother came back to the table, her face was sad. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she said. “Why didn’t you tell me that you pushed Paula in the mud and spoiled her new snowsuit?”

33 A mouthful of chocolate pudding blocked my throat, thick and bitter. I had to wash it down with milk. Finally, I said, “I didn’t do it.”

34 But the words came out like hard, dry little seeds, hollow and insincere. I tried again. “I didn’t do it. Jimmy Lane did it.”

35 “Of course we’ll believe you,” Mother said slowly, “but the

whole neighborhood is talking about it. Mrs. Sterling heard the story from Mrs. Fein and sent David over to say we should buy Paula a new snowsuit. I can’t understand it.”

36 “I didn’t do it,” I repeated, and the blood beat in my ears like a slack drum. I pushed my chair away from the table, not looking at Uncle Frank or Mother sitting there, solemn and sorrowful in the candlelight.

37 The staircase to the second floor was dark, but I went down the long hall to my room without turning on the light switch and shut the door. A small unripe moon was shafting squares of greenish light along the floor and the windowpanes were fringed with frost.

38 I threw myself fiercely down on my bed and lay there, dry-eyed and burning. After a while I heard Uncle Frank coming up the stairs and knocking on my door. When I didn’t answer, he walked in and sat down on my bed. I could see his strong shoulders bulk against the moonlight, but in the shadows his face was featureless.

39 “Tell me, honey,” he said very softly, “tell me. You don’t have to be afraid. We’ll understand. Only tell me what really happened. You have never had to hide anything from me, you know that. Only tell me how it really happened.”

40 “I told you,” I said. “I told you what happened, and I can’t

make it any different. Not even for you I can't make it any different."

41 He sighed then and got up to go away. "Okay, honey," he said at the door. "Okay, but we'll pay for another snowsuit anyway just to make everybody happy, and ten years from now no one will ever know the difference."

42 The door shut behind him and I could hear his footsteps growing fainter as he walked off down the hall. I lay there alone in bed, feeling the black shadow creeping up the underside of the world like a flood tide. The silver airplanes and the blue capes all dissolved and vanished, wiped away like the crude drawings of a child in coloured chalk from the colossal blackboard of the dark. That was the year the war began, and the real world, and the difference.



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